

Sacred & Profane Season 3, Episode 9

American Iconoclasm

[00:00:00] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I'm Kurtis Schaeffer.

[00:00:01] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And I'm Martien Halvorson-Taylor. And this is Sacred & Profane.

[00:00:12] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Over the last few years, Americans have removed statues from public spaces at what might be a record clip. Confederate statues are falling nationwide.

[00:00:22] **Newstape** As the nation demands racial justice following George Floyd's death, Virginia's governor says it's time for the Confederate statues in our capital to go no more.

[00:00:33] **Newstape** What what once was a Confederate monument in the park. And if you're in North Carolina, it is gone.

[00:00:42] **Kurtis Schaeffer** One of the first efforts to remove a statue was started right here in Charlottesville, Virginia, when an activist named Zyhana Byrant, then a local high school student, petitioned the city council to remove Confederate memorials that sat around the county courthouse.

[00:00:58] **Newstape** The city of Charlottesville, Virginia, has taken down the statues of Confederate generals Robert E Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Hundreds of people cheered as crews hoisted the monument away on a flatbed truck.

[00:01:10] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** With our colleague Jalane Schmidt, we reported on the religious significance of these Confederate statues, as well as what might replace them.

[00:01:20] **Kurtis Schaeffer** And we absolutely recommend you go back and listen to those episodes if you want to know more.

[00:01:25] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Now, Jalane, besides being a scholar of religion, is also head of UVA's memory project. The Memory Project is helping to fund an initiative in Charlottesville called Swords into Plowshares that seeks to transform the city's bronze Robert E Lee statue into new public art right here in town.

[00:01:49] **Kurtis Schaeffer** There's a lot about that project that's still unfolding. But this unique public art project got us thinking about a very, very old human impulse. Iconoclasm. It's a term that originally described the destruction of religious or sacred imagery.

[00:02:08] **Erin Thompson** The deliberate destruction of images. It's incredibly common in human culture and history, and it shows the power that we think of images having. Right? You smash a rock, you're doing construction. You smash a rock shaped like a human head, and you're running the risk of killing someone through a magical connection with their portrait statue or offending the gods or starting a political revolution.

[00:02:37] **Speaker 1** That's Erin Thompson. She's an art historian. Or, to be more accurate, an historian of art crime, including the looting and destruction of sacred artifacts.

[00:02:47] **Erin Thompson** I started writing this book, *Smashing Statues*, because I had a tweet about monument removal go viral. And what was most interesting to me was that there are thousands of comments on that tweet with people arguing. And so many people were saying that that taking down statues is just simply not something that either Americans or that or modern civilized people do, that this is something that happens only far away, either in space or history. And I knew that -- no. Every society removes statues that don't represent its beliefs anymore.

[00:03:27] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** We wanted to have a conversation with Jalane and Erin about how removing statues in Charlottesville and across the country fits in with both American history and the very, very long history of creating and destroying statues of gods, kings, generals, and anyone else rich or important enough to have their likeness put out in the public. What one group of people puts up another wants to tear down.

[00:03:58] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Erin says that the U.S. either has a very long history or a very thin history of iconoclasm, depending on how you look at it. Even before the nation was founded, New Yorkers famously pulled down a statue of King George, the third in 1776.

[00:04:16] **Erin Thompson** The very first metal statue ever put up in America was an equestrian statue of King George III, and that lasted only seven years before New Yorkers heard the Declaration of Independence read and then swarmed the statue, knocked it down, chopped it into pieces and melted it in the bullets that they then used to fight King George's army.

[00:04:41] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So this is baked in to the formation of America?

[00:04:46] **Erin Thompson** Yeah! What's not so common, and what we're seeing more of these days, is people who are not in power demanding change in monuments. Though usually if a monument comes down throughout American history, it's sort of a nonevent because it's whoever is in charge of that space or that monument decides, we don't want this anymore. And it goes away without anybody noticing. But what's happening in the last few years is that people who do not yet have the political authority to control these spaces are saying, actually, these are public spaces and these are our spaces too and we don't want them. In fact, that hasn't actually happened. There's been a lot of removal all not a whole lot of destruction. So what I did for the book was make this big, dorky spreadsheet tracking the fate of all of the statues that left their pedestals from the death of George Floyd on and found that there is only a single case of the irrevocable destruction of an image. There is a...a statue, or an obelisk, basically with a portrait of Christopher Columbus about the size of the serving platter carved on it, on a monument honoring Italian-American immigrants. And they chipped off that portrait and put in an Italian flag instead. So an economical solution. Everywhere else, the removed statues have gone into storage or then relocated other public space like a historic cemetery. If the Swords into Plowshares initiative goes forth -- which is proposing to melt down the statue of Robert E Lee removed from Charlottesville and transform it into another statue -- that will be, as far as I can tell through my research, the very first irrevocable destruction of a Confederate statue ever. Not just in the last few years, but ever. These things are highly defended.

[00:06:43] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** That's an amazing statistic.

[00:06:45] **Erin Thompson** The power of dorky spreadsheets.

[00:06:48] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** The irrevocable power of dorky spreadsheets.

[00:06:50] **Erin Thompson** Yeah.

[00:06:52] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So, Erin, your spreadsheet really shows that destroying statues is pretty rare in America. But Jalane, you've mentioned a statue to us of Columbus that was melted down, although not necessarily on moral grounds.

[00:07:05] **Jalane Schmidt** Yeah, well, you you mentioned Columbus. So I'd like to start with that. With early 20th century, the kind of ascension. Italian-Americans was a high point for the erection of statues of Columbus. You know, and and also the, you know, increasing identification of Italian-Americans as white. You know, that that's really important here, too. So it's kind of a it's kind of an announcement that, like we have arrived, as it were, you know, on on the part of these Italian immigrants. So in Chicago, there was a statue of Columbus, which was put up in the 19th century that was really just poorly formed from an esthetic perspective, and people hated it. You know, Chicagoans just really thought it was ugly? And finally, shortly after the assassination of President McKinley in 1901, it was finally decided that, you know, this statue of Columbus has got to go. He was removed and the ten tons of bronze were melted down in order to make a a statue of McKinley.

[00:08:19] **Erin Thompson** And statues of Columbus also served as a promise, just like Columbus was someone who is seen as as serving America despite being Italian. Italian-Americans were putting up these statues that acted as a promise to the communities that they were in, that we are Italian, but we also have the best interests of Americans at heart.

[00:08:40] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** I wonder if, particularly in sort of the early discussion about monuments, there was a religious bent to it, whether, for example, particularly Jewish or Protestant, anti idle religious ideas deemed were they ever deemed inappropriate for religious reasons.

[00:09:02] **Erin Thompson** Yes, which is why Americans took so long to get to a tradition of public monumental art. And very early after the founding of the country, there was a thought, Well, we should commemorate George Washington as a great president. And there was a huge debate at the time about, well, what sort of monument would be an American monument? So in the period, Congress seemed to spend more time debating monuments than they even did in 2020. And there is an idea that, you know, the big, gaudy gilded statues are something that specifically European Catholics do. And this is not appropriate for an American Protestant either as a means of controlling public opinion and sort of playing on people's more and emotional states or simply as a religious idea. It's not modest enough. It's not misstating what we want our leaders to be.

[00:10:10] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** And in your book you talk about how that eventually leads us to the Washington Monument, which is seen as being a bit more tasteful since it's not a huge statue of Washington himself. And you also have a pretty funny example of that aversion to depicting political leaders in heroic poses where someone did actually carve an idealized sculpture of George Washington that was absolutely not well-received.

[00:10:40] **Erin Thompson** So the very first statue carved by an American sculptor, the very first public monument, was in the mid-19th century, a commission by a Bostonian named Horatio Greenough to carve an monument to George Washington to place in the U.S. congressional building. And it was supposed to serve as a model for congressmen, for future political leaders. And this was what power was supposed to look like in the U.S.

But Greenough had a blank slate because there wasn't an American tradition of monuments. And he decided to use that neoclassical model, which was familiar to him from his time in Europe. But it basically meant he plopped a portrait head of wrinkled jowly Washington onto the body of a buff superhero draped in a toga, essentially nude to the waist with the nice strappy sandals. And it was immediately came in for all sorts of criticism from Congress, in part because they thought it looked silly that Washington wouldn't have pranced around seminude, but in large part because they thought it was a representation of power as something unattainable to them. So Washington is raising one hand to point to the heavens, Greenough said that was to signal his connection to the divine, though he essentially looks like someone that has a is divinely ordained to be president, not something that anybody else could hope to attain if they weren't born into it. And so these congressmen didn't like walking past a statue every day that that they could never achieve their dreams, that they would never be as as powerful or its leader as Washington. So they they kicked it out. They put it outside for a couple of years and then they moved it to a museum. where you can see it today, this is in the Smithsonian Museum of American history.

[00:12:37] **Kurtis Schaeffer** It's interesting. You can still see something of that attitude in the years immediately after the Civil War. Didn't Robert E Lee say he didn't want people to make statues of him?

[00:12:46] **Jalane Schmidt** Yeah. Robert E Lee gave the advice that in the interest of national reconciliation after the Civil War, that there be no Confederate monuments erected. He said it's not appropriate to have such monuments. He didn't want the Confederate flag at his own funeral or he wasn't buried in his Confederate uniform. You know, and this this was purposeful, you know, Lee said, so as not to keep open the wounds of war and strife. You know, so it's ironic that his admirers, you know, Lost Cause admirers would commission so many statues of Robert E Lee and install them in public places. Exactly what Lee advised against. Just as Lee warned this going to have a tendency of increasing strife and disagreement about meanings of the war. And that's what we're seeing today is a wholesale reconsideration or, you know, or at least that these criticisms that have always existed about these monuments, you know, are now being considered a new and given more favorable hearing.

[00:13:55] **Erin Thompson** Exactly. Which is why I think it's so important to look into monuments as monuments rather than just accepting that the monument is about the history that it purports to be about. And because a monument, I don't think taking down a monument erases history, it's more often true that putting up a monument erases history. All the other stories besides the ones it wants to tell. So you need to look at what were the motivations of the people who brought it up, what sort of messages that they want to convey to audiences. And because so many Confederate monuments were put up years, decade, generations after the close of the Civil War. There's a real wide range of motivation that have often very little to do with any sort of historical truth about the war.

[00:14:47] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So so it seems like early on there was a certain wariness of monuments. And do you think there was. Let me put it this way. Do you think there was a turning point in American attitudes toward monuments at any time or any place?

[00:15:05] **Erin Thompson** Definitely before the Civil War, it was fairly unusual for a community to have any sort of public sculpture. In terms of your average town square, there is either a still Protestant resistance to the use of ostentatious public images or just a

practical thought of we'd rather spend our money on something else. But. There was a huge wave of invention aching after the Civil War, in large part to shape the memory of the war. The shift of monuments spreading through town centers both in the north and the south came a bit later when the question of how do the new citizens admitted to the union after the end of the war, how are they going to function? Are black Americans going to be able to have political and social equality? As it seems they were promised by the war? Or is it going to be something else? Now, there were a wave of. Civil War monuments either on the Confederate or Union side, which are really about showing who should hold power in the new United States now that white Southerners and Northerners are reconciled. All right. They can be the ones who are running the country and is black people up here on these monuments. They do so as crowds begging for their freedom in the position that essentially those in power wanted them to continue to hold this sort of second class status, then admitting that they're at or to equality.

[00:16:54] **Jalane Schmidt** Yeah, the example in Richmond of the Lee statue there, you know, which is coinciding with the first so-called unmixed legislature, you know, that that is, you know, all black elected officials have been removed from office by strictures on on voting, you know, threats and and and the like. And so, yeah, there is a connection between the rise of kind of the legal strategies of Jim Crow, the kind of, you know, de jure segregation, you know, by law, segregation by law, and the esthetics, you know, which celebrated, you know, and valorized the the quote unquote, the old South, you know, which of course, was the slave ocracy, a relationship there. And you can see that as you can hear, as it were, in the installation ceremony speeches. And so this is an attempt to teach the next generation the values, you know, that this is part and parcel. It's the esthetic representation of the overthrow of reconstruction and the building of a Jim Crow, you know, regime, which is the closest approximation that that these white Southerners could make to the old South, you know, the antebellum era. And this is why it's so important that monuments are usually figural, I think, because they are attempting to seduce the viewer into thinking that an abstract idea is how society should work by representing it and thus warm as a beautiful body. You don't see, you know, how can you represent the South? No, you can represent a really attractive man or woman who is personify the values that easy. And this is true of public art and religious art throughout human history, Angels, the Virgin Mary, etc. and they are represented as as beautiful creatures to make you respond with, with longing, with desire. And then that desire can be shaped into an adherence to a point of view.

[00:19:13] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So in the case of statues in Asia, particularly religious statues in Asia, the thing that really brings the statue to life for communities is consecration. It's a ritual that in many cases invites the deity into the statue. And it's only at that point that the statue becomes a part of the life of that community. And because of this, there's the possibility of de consecration. Something bad can happen to the statue. There's also the possibility of re consecration, and it connects the statue to the ritual life of the community and it connects it to the memory of of the of the community as well. And I wondering if if there are analogs to consecration in the American setting.

[00:20:10] **Erin Thompson** Oh, definitely. So many of the public monuments that we see were cut up in elaborate rituals that involved hundreds or thousands of members from the community. The statue of Columbus in the state, Paul's State Capitol, the Minnesota state Capitol, was put up after a massive parade. All the schoolchildren were given the day off so they could participate in the parade. There were speeches. There was a special high mass in the cathedral and there were multiple brass bands. And then the drummers gathered around the statue during the speeches. And it's interesting to me to think about

how this to focus on on removing or transforming statues has also involved ritual. So Mike Fortuna, the indigenous activist in the Twin Cities who orchestrated the toppling of this Columbus statue. He did so during the day to the sound of drums because he wanted to show the ritual of removal of the community, rejecting the statue to make just as much of an impact as the consecration ritual that to speak of putting it up. And that's what gets me really excited about the possibilities in the world today. If statues just vanish without any discussion of why they even went up or what we want to happen. I think that's worse than that anyway. But there are so many activists, so many community members who are interested in having these conversation and making the removal an event, a repudiation of the injustice, unjust ideas that that went into making the statue and of creating something new that will signify how the community wants to move forward into the future. Memory is expensive and things don't stay on their own. And I think that there are so many sites of Indigenous or Black history that are crumbling in America for a lack of preservation dollars. And I wonder why we have to continue to pay these. It's money to the museums to preserve and the tokens of white supremacy. And I think we can continue to have the conversation without having the objects.

[00:22:43] **Jalane Schmidt** Absolutely. I mean, the installation of the monuments, these Confederate monuments was, you know, accompanied by a lot of pomp and circumstance. They were spectacles. And I think that the creation of new works of public art will, you know, also have those dynamics kind of officially inaugurating them, charging them for, I'd say, the kind of announcement to the public of these these values that the art is said to represent. I anticipate if Charlottesville is able to commission and install a new, you know, new public monuments, that this will definitely include, you know, kind of public gatherings.

[00:23:27] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** So speaking of public space, do you think in some ways we've come full circle to that early American aversion to statues of heroes on horses? I mean, we don't really know what's going to replace the statue of Robert E Lee yet in Charlottesville, but I have the feeling it won't be glorifying one person as a symbol of the town or the region in some way.

[00:23:51] **Erin Thompson** I think that the you know, we're kind of at a place, certainly with memorials, let's put it that way, where inclusion of realistic figurative images in memorials is, you know, kind of not the most innovative. Practice. And if we look at, you know, some of the more notable memorials that have gone in in the past couple of decades, I'm thinking here of Maya Lin's Vietnam veterans, a memorial, the memorial to enslaved laborers at the University of Virginia. There's more more of an emphasis on abstraction, on a accounting for the enormity of the individuals who were were killed in the war or were enslaved at the university. By including their names, you know, etching their names into a wall or a structure. And I think I find human figures problematic because it kind of continues this great man theory of history that, you know, kind of privileging a certain individual, you know, that's deemed praiseworthy. And then you find out two decades later that, you know, they had, you know, feet of clay and, you know, did terrible things that we don't want to have valorized in our public space. I hope that we're moving past use of human figures. I think we can be more innovative.

[00:25:16] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** The although, you know, it's interesting that you cite those two examples. I would also cite those as spaces that are incredibly powerful. But in both cases, there was pushback from certain parts of the community. You know, retroactively in the mylan's design, they they planted figures because some of the vets felt that they had been effaced by not having figures. And and certainly among some of the community in Charlottesville, the fact that there wasn't a figure and that that was deemed,

you know, for many of the reasons that you point out problematic, felt like changing the rules at the most inopportune time. So so as not to include, you know, representational figures.

[00:26:08] **Jalane Schmidt** Right. And in the case of the memorial to enslaved laborers at the University of Virginia, an interesting compromise was made. There were some especially older descendants of the enslaved community who were consulted, who, you know, really wanted a human figure there. And so the compromise that was struck was to etch in the eyes of Isabella Gibbons, who was an enslaved woman at the university. And there's a very iconic photo of Isabella Gibbons. And and to take just that, the her eyes and etched them in, you know, and kind of supersized the monumental size, as it were, on the outside of the structure of the memorial. So that if you stand at just the right angle, you can see her eyes kind of peering out at you. So there is this human element without a kind of explicit human form.

[00:27:01] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Yeah. And there they are completely arresting. You know, if you drive by at just the right and look over at just the right moment with the light just at the right angle, you're staring deep into Isabella Gibbons' eyes.

[00:27:16] **Erin Thompson** I have to agree with Jalane about the problems that figure out a monument. I think the discussion these days too often takes the form of who else do we put on the horse? You know, we have taken down this dude on a horse from the traditional monument. And who are we going to put have instead? Is it going to be Harriet Tubman, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whatever, whatever. But I think there's no one person that everyone can look up to and see themselves in, see the possibilities for their alliance. And we need abstraction to allow for the universality of inspiration.

[00:27:58] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sacred & Profane was produced for the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. Our senior producer is Emily Gadek. Today's guests were Jalane Schmidt and Aaron Thompson. You can find out more about Swords into Plowshares and the plan to repurpose the Robert E Lee statue at S-I-P Cville dot com. And you can find out more about America's long debate about public art in Erin Thompson's book, Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments. We have links to both on our web site.

[00:28:32] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor** Music for this episode comes from Blue Deot Sessions. You can find out more about our work at Religion Lab, dot Virginia dot edu, or by following us on Twitter at the Religion Lab.